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The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

THE publication of a new novel by England's Somerset Maugham is always an event in literary circles; but the advent of "The Razor's Edge," which is the title of Mr. Maugham's newest novel published by Doubleday Doran on April 20, holds special significance to Americans. "The Razor's Edge" was written in this country at the author's home in South Carolina where he retreated after the fall of France in 1940. Besides, not only was the book written in this country but also its chief character is a young American lad, the first time that Mr. Maugham in his long list and plays has given a character this distinction.

It has been twenty-nine years this coming autumn since Mr. Maugham's name first drew nation-wide notices in America. Although he already had written two small and unimportant volumes, in September 1915 he published a book, later to be recognized as a modern classic and to be known to all college and university students as "Of Human Bondage." I rather fancy if a Gallup poll were made of college book stores throughout these United States, it would be discovered that "Of Human Bondage" is the one volume that annually reaches an all high in sales.

But the field of the novel is not the only medium through which Mr. Maugham reaches his public. In 1921 he published a collection of short stories called "The Trembling of a Leaf," containing that famous characterization, "Miss Thompson." You probably recall that "Miss Thompson," several years later, was translated to the stage under the title of "Rain," the original story of Sadie Thompson, that tawdry trollop out of San Francisco's tenderloin, being faithfully preserved and frankly portrayed in the theatre by the late Miss Jeanne Eagles.

Besides Mr. Maugham's other novels . . . there have been some twenty of them . . . and besides his other short stories . . . there have been several scores of these . . . he is the author of twenty-four plays, seventeen of which were stage triumphs. During the 1920's and the early 1930's probably no British dramatist since Oscar Wilde had had such successes in the London theatre. In such plays as "The Circle," "Our Betters," "The Constant Wife," and "The Letter," Mr. Maugham gave to the stage a trenchant wit, a shameless cynicism, and a masterful craftsmanship, if nothing else. Such stage stars as John Drew and Ethel Barrymore, as Mrs. Pat Campbell

and Mrs. Leslie Carter have been cast unforgettably in Maugham's flashing and witty drawing room comedies.

Although Mr. Maugham, from time to time, has been guilty of writing so-called pot boilers, the arrival of a novel of first stature by him is still a literary event. You can well understand, therefore, the undercurrent of excitement with the publication of "The Razor's Edge." Without slightest hesitation, I can say that "The Razor's Edge" is as fine a piece of craftsmanship as any I have read for several years. By means of accurately timed flashbacks and flash forwards . . . if I may use that term . . . you will read once again the old Somerset Maugham you discovered years ago in "Of Human Bondage" and "Moon and Sixpence." The full length portrait of young Larry Darrell, the book's main character, is painted with the firmest strokes on a background that would rival a Gainsborough canvas. Although when you finish the novel, you may feel that Larry's mysticism is not entirely convincing, you nevertheless will say to yourself that here is another Maugham character that will live beside Phillip Carey and Charles Strickland.

The main theme of "The Razor's Edge" is saintliness; it is the story of a young man's search for God. Larry Darrell, the young man, is twenty years old in 1918. As an aviator he has just been discharged from the U. S. Air Corps. He has returned to his home city of Chicago with the horrible memories of witnessing, just before the Armistice, the death of his best friend in the Air Corps. In returning from a flight over enemy lines, Larry's life, when he was chased by a German plane, had been saved; but Larry's friend who had driven off the enemy plane, had died shortly after his body was pulled from the cockpit when the plane had reached the home base. As Larry says, "you think of a fellow who an hour before was full of life and fun, and he's lying dead; it's all so cruel and so meaningless. It's hard not to ask yourself what life is all about and whether there is any sense to it, or whether it's all a tragic blunder of blind fate."

With this as an incentive and with a small but adequate income from the estate of his dead parents, Larry leaves Chicago for Paris. He renounces his love for Isabelle and his opportunity to join an extremely prosperous firm run by the

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father of his prep school roommate. He disappears into the narrow and crooked streets of Paris's Latin Quarter, to be seen only from time to time by his former friends. He reads and studies and meditates. Not because he is financially embarrassed, rather because he wants the experience, he works in a coal mine in northern France. In order to learn German he joins a newly acquired acquaintance for a walking trip through Germany. Near Bonn he obtains work in the vineyards. He visits Spain, he travels in Italy, he winters in Greece, always reading, studying, meditating. As a deckhand he ships on a round-the-world-cruise steamer to India. And there, in India, Larry's odyssey is complete. There under the influence of a Hindu teacher, Larry finds his God; he makes his discovery of the Absolute. There Larry learns how to live: "with calmness, forbearance, compassion, selflessness, and continence."

However, I do not wish to give you the idea that the Larry's odyssey is the only thread of story in "The Razor's Edge." You, the reader, never see Larry in the coal mines of northern France or in that broad fertile valley high in the mountains of India. You will learn about his experiences from Larry himself months or probably several years after they have happened. It is back in Paris, where the story moves from Chicago after the first fifty pages, that Larry, from time to time, meets his former Chicago friends, and where gradually, slowly, and even reluctantly he tells them of his findings, of his travels, of his studies, and finally of his conquest over the earthy.

Actually, Larry's friends are the characters who keep the pace of the tale moving in its regular waves. And these friends, Larry's friends, run the gamut of Maugham's magnificent characterizations. In his novels as well as in his plays, undoubtedly you have met them before; but I doubt that you have met them with such completeness. Several of these characters are worthy of a play in themselves, and one of them in particular, Elliott Templeton, is as fully developed a characterization as is Larry.

Already I have spoken of Isabelle. Isabelle was in love with Larry, and when Larry left Chicago for his two years in Paris, she decided to wait for him. She was not unattractive, and she did wish to marry and to have a home. Yet, to marry out of her own social class which centered around those dreary brownstone fronts on Lake Shore Drive, was out of the question. At any time during those two years when Larry was in Paris,

Isabelle could have married Gray Maturin, the tall, wealthy, and handsome young Irish lad who had joined his father's brokerage firm after the war. Larry, too, could have joined the firm, and when Larry preferred to remain at the club reading William James on psychology, neither Isabelle nor Gray could understand him.

When Larry's first two years of study in Paris were finished, Isabelle and her mother spent the spring and summer in Europe. At that time Isabelle and Larry reached an agreement to disagree; whereupon Isabelle returned to America to marry Gray.

It is during Isabelle's summer in Paris when the reader becomes acquainted with Elliott Templeton, an uncle of Isabelle's, her mother's brother. Elliott is the kind of character that Mr. Maugham has handled successfully in earlier novels and plays, but never to the perfection achieved in "The Razor's Edge." Uncle Elliott is, according to Mr. Maugham, what the French call "serviceable." As the author tells, "Elliott has a pleasantly malicious tongue and there was no scandal about his exalted friends that did not reach his ears. From him you could learn who was the father of Princess X's last child and who was the mistress of the Marquis De Y. I don't believe that even Marcel Proust knew more about the inner life of the aristocracy than Elliott Templeton."

After all, these characters plus several others I have not mentioned, form only the background for Larry's story. Although they are vital to the construction of the tale, they are secondary in importance to the main thread of plot. Through them, you the reader learn about Larry, and become acquainted with his progress in his search for God.

I fancy that there were many Larry Darrells during those hectic years following War One. I recall that during the 1920's when Mr. Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" was being discussed so violently, the statement was made that there were many Henrys and Catherines during the war. Well, there were not a few Larry Darrells; and there will be many more Larry Darrells following the present war. If you recall the character of Jeffrey Wilson in Mr. John P. Marquand's "So Little Time," you may well ask yourself these questions: Was not Jeffrey Wilson a kind of Larry Darrell? Was not Jeffrey looking for the Absolute? And possibly, did not Jeffrey find his God on the last page of the novel, when Mr. Marquand took him into the quietness and stillness of St. Patrick's cathedral?

I hope you read Mr. Maugham's "The Razor's Edge"; you always will recall the reading as an unforgettable experience.



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